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Harding, Warren Gamaliel, Pres U.S.

ADDRESS

OF THE

PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

AT THE

COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES
of the AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, D. C., *on* JUNE 8
1921, *at* 2 P. M.



21-26516

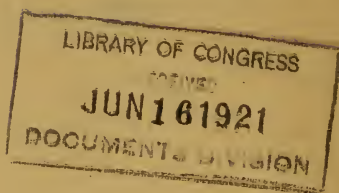
WASHINGTON
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ADDRESS.

TO BISHOP HAMILTON, THE FACULTY, THE GRADUATING CLASS, AND STUDENT BODY:

I am glad to extend greetings and congratulations on completion of another year's work of the University. We are at the height of the annual commencement season, when thousands of students go out from institutions all over the land to take up the tasks for which their years of study have been preparing them.

I wish I could impress the young men and women of every graduating class this year with my own acute conviction regarding the obligation of service that is placed upon them. They have been favored with the privilege of special equipment and preparation, such as is vouchsafed to an all too small proportion of the people. They will not prove themselves worthy of their peculiar good fortune or of their special responsibility unless they regard it as a trust to be held for the good of the whole community.

We look to this month's graduating classes to provide far more than their numerical share of leaders for the Nation in a future not far ahead. You will play your parts in a world in many ways unlike any that former generations of your colleagues could have anticipated.

I would feel that I had performed well the part that has providentially fallen to me if I could impress upon everyone who goes out this year with a diploma the thought that it is not a certificate of right to special favor and profit in the world but rather a commission of service. Men all about you will need the best you will be able to give to them.

Never, I firmly believe, was there a time when the call was so insistent as that to those capable of giving unselfish, broad, comprehending direction to public thought.

You of the next generation of leadership will live in a time of readjustment and reorganization. Much that has been esteemed elemental has been swept aside. Almost nothing remains that we may safely think of as sacred, as secure from the attacks of the iconoclasts. It is a time in which men search their souls and assay their convictions, in which they examine the very fundamentals of institutions immemorially accepted, in which no tradition may be held immune from the assaults of the skeptic and the doubter.

In such a time I can not but feel that the great need which proper education can supply is embraced in the broadest culture, the most inclusive vision, the most clear-eyed comprehension of the terms which mankind's problem to-day presents. There was a time, and not very long ago, when we were wont to think of education as a sort of specialized training for some kind of special service. We esteemed it as an intensive process of equipping fortunate persons for doing particular things particularly well along established and accepted lines. To-day we may say that there are few accepted lines. Nothing remains with us that is not queried.' Therefore we need for the leadership of the coming generation an open-minded willingness to recognize the claim of the doubter, the innovator, the experimenter, the would-be constructionist.

But while we must give these adventurous ones their full chance, we must sedulously guard against the spirit of mere cynicism, the disposition to condemn all things as they are because they are not perfect, the tendency to tear down before any plan of reconstruction has been prepared. The trained mind—provided it is not over-trained—is the one that must provide the saving faculty of discrimination. The world must go forward, and not backward; and it will not go forward as the result of any philosophy of mere destruction. After all, unsatisfactory as some earnest people regard the present structure of society and existing human relationships, a reasonably conscious world has been a long time traveling as far on the road toward ideal conditions as it now has reached. History has afforded many illustrations of societies crumbling and going to pieces, and the process has invariably been attended with superlative disaster to great masses of humanity. It is a commonplace that at this time the world stands on the brink of what looks much like a precipice. It must not be allowed to take the fatal plunge. It will not, if it shall be able to summon to its leadership in the coming generation men and women who will unite a necessary measure of conservative purpose with an equally necessary portion of willingness to consider new expedients, to test out old formulas, to apply the acid test even to what we have learned to believe is pure gold.

The education that can truly prepare for the demands of society in the time before us can not be given merely in academic halls. The great world outside must contribute of its practical experience, its intimate knowledge, its discipline and disappointments, to complete the equipment. We can learn much from books, but if we learned only from books we would learn only the wisdom of the past. Nobody will ever live long enough or be wise enough to equip himself with all the wisdom of the past, to say nothing of projecting it into the future. The student who has learned the art

of learning, of application, of concentration upon the particular problem before him, will find that he is better qualified for the practical affairs of life than the one who has merely stowed even a very great array of facts in his brain. Books are tremendously useful if they be made the servitors of the inquiring mind; they may be deadening and worse than useless if they become the master of the too receptive mind. He who has learned how to use books, how to find what he requires in them and then to apply it, without the necessity of overloading his mind with unnecessary detail, is the one who has made his educational preparation most useful. As a mere storage warehouse, for facts, beliefs, impressions, the human mind is an unsatisfactory plant. It is too liable to error and too limited in its capacity. But, on the other side, when it is used as a macerator of information, a molding, developing, forming, and re-forming mechanism, it does its best work. To do that work, it must possess the qualities of boldness, originality, confidence. It must be capable of sustained and well-directed effort.

So, to the young men and women in cap and gown, gathered here and on a thousand other platforms to receive the testimonies that they have completed their allotted academic courses, I would plead that they recognize that, after all, the effectiveness of their educational effort will at last be in proportion to their recognition that it is only preparation and not conclusion.

There is no such thing as finished education. The wisest person that ever lived took his last observation of life and living into a mind which was still in the processes of preparation.

It is, I think, a part of our national good fortune that we have viewed culture from this standpoint. I think the college graduate who imagines himself at the completion of his education is one of the most pathetic human spectacles we have to view. Fortunately, he is not nearly so numerous as the humorous paragraphers would have us believe. Fortunately, also, in case he may be too well endowed with self-esteem and confidence, the world has special facilities for rapidly and efficaciously reducing the excess of assurance.

Its democracy is one of the fine things about our American system of higher education. It is almost invariably true that any young man or woman, who earnestly wishes it, may attain the privileges of the best educational preparation. There is, thank God, no caste system here. All kinds of experience, of social background, of ancestry, of tradition, of training are brought together in the melting pot of the American college or university. Neither social nor intellectual snobbery is likely very long to survive such experience. That is why education, when it is of the right sort, is the greatest leveling and democratizing influence we can find. It inculcates a realization

of true standards, an appreciation of the fact that differences in estate and fortune are, after all, but the superficialities of life as compared to the fundamentals of character, ambition, and determined purpose. To whatever extent it fails to impress this conception of the democracy of intellect, education will brand itself a failure.

The young men and women who are coming upon the world's stage to-day, equipped to take their parts as leaders, will find themselves welcomed as their predecessors have not always been in other times. Humanity is seeking as it never sought before for those who can see widely, clearly, fearlessly; who will be capable of determining what is sound and what is right, and courageous enough to stand for it, though they stand alone. Interrogation points have been written in the blood and sufferings of countless millions, at the end of a thousand statements of what a little time ago we deemed the very basic principles of economics, of sociology, of international relationships, of public policy and human justice. We must have that faculty of fine discrimination which shall understand what is good, true, and reliable, and what is false, unjust, and vicious.

I have known somewhat intimately a good many young people who have been growing into their years of maturity within the time of the great crisis through which the world has been and is still passing. My observation of them and of their attitudes toward life has given me, I may tell you, a greater confidence in our future than seems to be reflected in the pessimistic observations of some who would have us believe that, because our young people nowadays see things differently than we older ones saw them, the youth of to-day must somehow be a bit degenerate. On the other hand, I am convinced that their early introduction to the realities of life has given to the youth of our day a truer perspective, a better appraisal of human and social values. I have faith to believe that success, in the minds of educated young people to-day, means less in terms of dollars than it did two generations, or a generation, or a decade ago, and that it means more in terms of sincere human service than it ever did before. If I am right, then surely we have accomplished much for the betterment of mankind; for it is a great thing to have implanted such a spirit, such a purpose, such a vision, in the minds and souls of those who are to direct our future. This we have done to a greater extent in our generation than ever before in a like period.

The world and its experience constitute the greater university in which all of you have yet to complete, so far as it is humanly possible, your education. I pray you to go out to it without too much thought of personal rewards, of individual gains; and yet, not to thrust these considerations entirely aside. Be generous, but do not

dissipate your capital of knowledge and ability in aimless, useless generousities. Hold true to those ideals which your own country and its institutions represent. We Americans will best help mankind at large if we most earnestly sustain men immediately about us. Let us make our America the best place on earth in which men and women may dwell. Let us make it an example to all others, an inspiration and a model. It has been our privilege to see this country which we love called upon to redress the wrongs of a world, to restore the balance of civilization. We could not have played that part had we not first been true to ourselves, confident of our destiny, assured of our righteousness and of the power inherent in our concept of righteousness. Let us go on, holding fast to what, in the great trial, has been proven good, seeking to make it better, stronger, and more unselfish. Let us place a firm reliance in our destiny and let us seek to realize that destiny through unceasing effort and unfaltering devotion.

Humanity never needed broad, illuminated understanding more than it does now. It must needs lean heavily upon those to whom it has given its best of opportunity for preparation. Those who to-day hold aloft as best they can the standard of civilization and progress must presently pass it on to you who are just entering upon your responsibilities. I can think of no greater service I could render than to impress upon every graduate of this June the part that awaits him in humanity's affairs, if he will but realize it. Therefore, I implore a dedication to common service, to human betterment, to civilization's advancement, on the part of these young people who at last must so largely direct the affairs of country and of society in the hard but very hopeful times which lie ahead.



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